# UN Review Processes

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## Politics and international state- and peacebuilding

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### Key Points:

- Three UN review documents have been produced in 2015 along the UN reform agenda: the UN peacekeeping review, the review of the UN peacebuilding architecture, and the Global Study on the implementation of UNSCR 1325.
- All three reviews call for a reform of the UN's work in fragile and conflict-affected states, and argue for a more dynamic and political approach.
- The need for building more inclusive partnerships is highlighted in all review documents.
- In UN peacekeeping in particular, the mandating of UN missions have to get more realistic – for this purpose, a sequenced, two-stage mandating process is suggested.
- The increasing political character of missions has to be based on a distinction between impartiality and neutrality. While UN missions have to be impartial, they cannot be neutral against violations of fundamental rights.
- The 'political arrangements' in the regions where peacekeeping and peacebuilding interventions take place have to be taken into account.

The UN reform agenda in 2015 has culminated in three review processes and the endorsement of a new framework for international development in the form of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). High-level panels evaluated and discussed the current state of UN peacekeeping (the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, led by Jose Ramos-Horta, delivered its report in June 2015), the UN peacebuilding architecture (the respective report by an Advisory Group of experts was also published in June 2015) and the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (the so-called 'Global Study' was launched in September 2015).

These review processes offer important insights in the current state of affairs regarding the peace-related efforts at UN level and suggest points for further development. Although the structural consequences of the three review reports might not be comparable with the steps taken ten years ago, when a peacebuilding review resulted in the establishment of the UN Peacebuilding Commission, the general propositions made are still far-reaching.

This briefing paper focuses on what could be considered a common response of all three reviews: that UN activities in the area of peace and conflict have to become much more political. The general trend in all three documents, also emphasised by now endorsed SDGs in the form of SDG 16, albeit in more general terms. Combined with the recognition of complexity and the need to search for local solutions, the reviews interestingly reflect the current disposition in peace- and statebuilding policy and research, as demonstrated by recent scholarship, including: diagnostic statements identifying an acknowledgement of the 'limits of causal knowledge' (Chandler 2015), a 'local turn' (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2013) or an 'era of disillusionment' (Bell 2015: 9-10).


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The three reviews work with the established vocabulary of UN peacebuilding and peacekeeping. Nevertheless, the conclusions closely resemble some of the main messages the political settlements approach puts forward, and so we draw out the commonality of the approach here. The three most relevant common themes: the increasing need for inclusive partnerships, the call for realistic mandating and more political interventions as a consequence of the complexity of circumstances, and the need for new concepts framing such an approach – will be highlighted and briefly commented on.

## The increasing need for inclusive partnerships

The increased importance of building partnerships is highlighted in all three reports, and is of course the general theme of the SDGs, particularly highlighted as the main target of SDG 17. What is it about partnerships that makes this notion so special right now? To discuss this question, we have to look at the different levels of partnerships that are highlighted in the reports. First, there is the need for a 'partnership within' the United Nations (UN, *Letter dated 16 June,* 2015: 29). Such a partnership of all UN organisations and sub-organisations is not a new call, but is still interesting since it reflects the general trend to whole-of-government and whole-of-system approaches (epitomised in acronyms like 3D, 3C or NATO's 'comprehensive approach'). While these issues had already been partly addressed by the integrated mission concept for peacekeeping missions, the general state of collaboration and coherence at headquarter level is still lacking. Without bridging the gap, particularly between peacekeeping and development, successful missions in complex, fragile environments are not possible. This reality is now acknowledged and should be addressed by an improved role of the country team and the resident coordinators in matters of peacebuilding (*Letter dated 16 June,* 2015: 21).

The main use of the 'partnership' term by the reviews, however, is still directed to the outside: to regional organisations, other international organisations, member states, but also, in explicit terms, to civil society organisations – international as well as local. In these partnerships, the UN claims to have a primus inter pares role, which derives from its special role related to international law – nevertheless, the reviews call for a use of this role to create a more inclusive and enabling environment for partners:

The United Nations should forge a vision for a stronger global and regional partnership for peace and security, with the United Nations as a standard-bearer for impartial political solutions, serving as an enabler of others. The framework for partnership should include modalities for capacity enhancement and burden-sharing, as well as mechanisms for monitoring and accountability (*Letter dated 16 June,* 2015: 30).

While the partnership with regional organisations obviously is of particular importance given the necessary share of workload in peacekeeping, the increased focus on civil society and women's organisations, at least for the reviews, reflects the needs of a local, well-grounded approach in complex conditions: 'Civil society, and women's organizations in particular, […] often functioning during active conflict as the only actors in conflict-affected communities delivering services and sustaining dialogue, and in the long term, leading post-conflict recovery' (UN, *Preventing Conflict*, 2015: 329). However, current experience shows a trend to overload the national level and to neglect partnerships on the subnational and local level. All efforts of peacebuilding should have to face and address this gap, which will be no easy effort.

Moreover, the concept of 'partnership' is fraught with geopolitical tussles. The current international trend shows also a new self-confidence of the countries that are generally perceived as being fragile and conflict-prone. This trend is demonstrated by the G7+ group of self-declared fragile states, which displays a new demand for self-responsibility in addressing the fragility challenge. What certainly is a good thing in terms of national ownership can at the same time turn into a severe challenge when international actors – including UN peacekeeping missions and development actors – start to deal directly with subnational entities and bypass the central authorities. In such instances, the political dimension of partnership building, especially on the local level, comes to the forefront and can complicate pragmatic decision-

making. The international constellation has also increased in complexity, and this also reflects at the local level.

## A call for realistic mandating and more political interventions

Peacebuilding's 'era of disillusionment' becomes especially visible in the reviews when the mandating of peacekeeping missions is discussed. The question of mandating is intrinsically linked to the debate about what is doable and what not, and the relationship between such feasibility concerns, the mandating process itself – in particular regarding the often contradictory expectations from the main international actors and the troop contributing countries – and the public perception of UN peacekeeping efforts. The reviews show sincere concern about the level of ambitions UN peacekeeping has to face, especially the discrepancy between broad, all-encompassing mandates and the non-equivalent practical means available to the missions on the ground. This discrepancy results in the severe problem of a general lack of trust towards UN missions, especially in matters of the protection of civilians.

The first obvious recommendation given by the reviews thus is the return to realistic planning: 'It is essential that the United Nations develop more realistic and contextualized political strategies. They must be based on improved analysis, strategy and planning' (*Letter dated 16 June,* 2015: 13). This is, however, much easier said than done considering the complex demands ranging from the integration of all possible aspects of development and statebuilding – as it is an implicit part of the integrated mission approach – and the wide ranging protection responsibilities that are hardly to fulfil on the ground. The reconnection of UN missions to the local level is seen as a key strategy in that regard (cf. for example *Preventing Conflict*, 2015: 25); however, recipes on how to enable the rank and file of missions to achieve this are missing.

The acknowledgement of the complexity of conflicts (e.g. UN, *Challenge of Sustaining Peace*, 2015: 10) – a key element that informs also political settlements research – leads to a very important, perhaps even ground-breaking discussion: the need for interventions to be more 'political'. 'While capacity-building, state-building, institution-building and development all demand considerable technical expertise, first and foremost peacebuilding must be understood as an inherently political process' (*Challenge of Sustaining Peace*, 2015: 9).

Several practical recommendations are made. The first is the very concrete problem of the consent of all involved parties with the presence of a UN mission (*Letter dated 16 June,* 2015: 46), and the issue of separating neutrality from impartiality. In this respect, the reviews argue for a political approach that takes a clearer stance on the need for non-consensual capacity by peacekeepers, as it is considered as impossible to get the consent of all armed parties for a mission in a highly complex conflict situation, like most of the current conflicts in Sub-Sahara Africa are. Furthermore, an impartial stance should be prioritised and also conceptually defended over neutrality, as there is no neutrality in relation to the violation of human rights. In last instance, a principle of neutrality for UN missions would contradict its mandate and its obligations in relation to the United Nations Charter.

Another long-standing issue that is addressed is the challenge of creating achievable mandates for the missions, as all attempts to overcome the prevailing 'Christmas tree mandate' approach had failed (*Challenge of Sustaining Peace*, 2015: 60). The key recommendation in this respect is the implementation of a 'two-stage sequenced mandating process' as a regular practice – UN missions should start with just an overall political goal and number of feasible priority tasks, and would then get a full mandate from the Security Council after a period of six months and a report back. This idea could indeed have the potential to overcome the problem of overburdening, although it has to be taken into account that most of these problems already occur when just dealing with priority tasks (as, for example, the protection of civilians during outbreaks of violence with a limited, insufficient number of military personnel).

## 'Political Arrangements': the search for new conceptual insights

The need for more political interventions also calls for more political concepts. This concern is addressed by several steps: at first, the reviews unanimously call for a return of the somewhat old-fashioned concept of 'conflict prevention' (e.g. *Challenge of Sustaining Peace*, 2015: 9; *Letter dated 16 June,* 2015: 25). Notwithstanding the necessary debate around this term which has resulted in move by civil society and academia to use 'conflict transformation' instead – this renewed emphasis on political interventions before the actual outbreak of violence is an important quest.

The second element where a new political approach shall be applied concerns the need for more inclusiveness in peace processes. 'The narrow focus on national and international formal peace processes, which often stumble or stall, prevents full consideration from being given to the multiple actors often busy with track 2 processes, such as building peace and security ceasefires in conflict-affected communities. These sub-national and local mediation initiatives, where women usually have a very prominent role, receive wholly inadequate recognition and support' (*Preventing Conflict*, 2015: 54). Such an acceptance of the need to go beyond the formal – or even informal – conventional diplomatic routes is important and timely, although not always easy to implement.

The reviews even go a step further and not only understand 'politics of exclusion' as driving factors of violent conflicts (*Challenge of Sustaining Peace*, 2015: 11), but also discuss the inherent problem of national ownership in this regard. 'National consultation exercises are organized with great expense and energy, but many end up predominantly recycling the views of the same narrow political class that jockeyed for power during the violence. Seldom is sufficient time and space afforded to organizing dialogue at the grass-roots level, on the ground, in the provinces, with broad inclusion' (*Challenge of Sustaining Peace*, 2015: 15). Often, national ownership is interpreted as the need to prioritise national governments, when in fact this can exacerbate conflict particularly in situations of divided post-conflict societies (*Challenge of Sustaining Peace*, 2015: 13, 18).

While the idea of addressing different layers of society and government with the same emphasis is laudable, the reviews do not offer new insights or approaches about the looming sovereignty challenge such a shift would imply. The UN is an organisation based upon state membership, with state sovereignty inscribed as one of its key foundational principles. Hence, states on the receiving end of peacebuilding interventions within this normative system have the undisputable legal right to act as the main interlocutor in terms of peacebuilding, as far as the UN system is concerned. Pathways of how to break this up without jeopardizing the whole system would need to be developed, and it is safe to say that such pathways would hardly be unanimously welcomed by those countries where the interventions ought to take place. The simple existence of the G7+ group is just one sign of such potential difficulties.

Finally, there is the need for new concepts that could support the framing of more local, inclusive peacebuilding interventions in complex and highly conflictive settings. Such a conceptual broadening is pursued by introducing the ideas of inclusive agreed frameworks (*Challenge of Sustaining Peace*, 2015: 52) and 'political arrangements' (*Letter dated 16 June,* 2015: 19). 'Political arrangements' are used to argue for a more inclusive approach, bringing women, communities, and other players that are not part of the 'usual' political game back in the mix of processes leading to sustainable peace. 'Many post-conflict settings are characterized by transitional political arrangements, weak political parties and elite-dominated peace processes. By working in partnership with the local population and, where appropriate, acting as a bridge between local communities and host authorities, United Nations peace operations can help to facilitate more inclusive political processes that address social cohesion, inequalities and marginalization and contribute to a more sustainable peace' (*Letter dated 16 June,* 2015: 77).

In this respect, empirical data is presented with the aim of proving that peace processes that do not aim for an inclusive approach are much more likely to fail than those that do, although it is not clear-cut whether such kind of correlation indeed can be read as a causality. The current state of hard evidence concerning such a relationship is still thin and needs to be enhanced considerably before it could serve as a serious background on which interventions could be based. Still, there is an urgent and understandable need for concept development that overcomes the limited thinking about cooperative security as represented in UN missions at current.

## Political Settlements and UN Peacebuilding

The need to rethink peacebuilding – from the perspective of wrong logics of sequencing (*Challenge of Sustaining Peace*, 2015: 15) or from a gender perspective (*Preventing Conflict*, 2015: 169) – is the common denominator of all three review processes. It is emphasized that UN initiatives not only should start at an earlier stage, before the outbreak of armed violence, but should also create linkages to the local level and consciously deal with the political interplay: 'United Nations peace operations must be deployed as part of a viable process aimed at such settlements. They must be conceived and planned in support of political solutions in order to respond to evolving conditions on the ground. Political strategies that underpin peace operations should enjoy the support of a united Security Council, regional entities and others vested in ending the conflict' (*Letter dated 16 June,* 2015: 27).

This is a challenging but nevertheless necessary call. Peacekeeping and peacebuilding are part of the process of reaching new or significantly revised political settlements. Through many painful misadventures, the UN and other international actors have learned that such settlements cannot be made by transferring blueprints, or even be crafted along a strategic plan. The last attempts to renegotiate the idea of state sovereignty – namely the idea of establishing an international criminal court and the 'responsibility to protect' agenda – showed mixed results at best. State sovereignty remains the elephant in the room, and will probably present the main obstacle in transforming the UN reviews to practice.

The complex social realities in fragile situations call for a political approach that accepts complexity as a given condition and is willing to engage in a political enterprise. Besides requiring strong political analysis this approach will involve many difficult, and also controversial, decisions on the local level, and as regards international principles.

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